Lessons from the Cross of Christ

A Study of Luke 23:32-43

Abstract

This study examines Luke's account of Christ's crucifixion, focusing particularly on two crucial sayings Jesus uttered from the cross: his prayer for forgiveness and his promise to the repentant thief. The cross of Christ reveals both the desperate condition of humanity and the magnificent love of God. Through the events at Calvary, we see mankind's urgent need for the forgiveness of sins and Christ's willingness and power to save all who come to Him in faith. The account demonstrates that sin is not merely a small matter but a fatal disease that separates humanity from the Holy Creator. Yet even in the midst of unspeakable suffering, Jesus demonstrated compassion and concern for souls, offering forgiveness to those who had no idea of the magnitude of their actions. The remarkable conversion of one of the crucified criminals illustrates the transforming power of God's grace and Christ's readiness to receive repentant sinners, even in their final moments. This study emphasizes that the cross is the supreme revelation of God's unimaginable love and mercy, showing us both the seriousness with which God views sin and the depths to which He was willing to go to redeem lost sinners.

Whenever I read the account of the Lord's sufferings in any of the four gospels, I think of Moses's experience caring for sheep in the wilderness. Remember, Moses had to flee from Pharaoh and was in danger of losing his life. The Scripture tells us that the Angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in a burning bush and said, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." When we consider the Savior's cross in a spiritual sense, we need to take off our sandals because we are on holy ground. The account of the Savior's suffering and death is of the utmost importance for our souls and deserves to be approached with a heart full of humility, wonder, and worship.

My wife and I have had the occasion to visit a number of European cathedrals. Many are quite beautiful and majestic structures and are generally centuries old. One particular cathedral in Milan, Italy, is known for its three large arched doorways leading from the church vestibule into the sanctuary where the worship services are conducted. There is one doorway on the right, one on the left, and the main doorway in the center. Above each of the three stone-arched doorways leading into the sanctuary, there is an inscription carved into the stone. The inscription on the right archway entrance reads, "All that pleases is but for a moment." The inscription on the left archway entrance reads, "All that troubles is but for a moment." The inscription over the center archway leading into the sanctuary reads, "All that is important is eternal."

These words address spiritual and eternal priorities. As you enter the sanctuary, the message is clear. There is nothing more important than giving full attention and making worship, adoration, and praise of the one true almighty God of heaven and earth, and hearing and receiving the Word of God, your priority. Certainly, the Gospel accounts of the Lord's sufferings on Calvary are a major priority in all our lives and of utmost importance to our souls.

Read Luke 23:32-43

In Luke's account of Jesus' suffering, we see Christ speaking from the cross. There are seven sayings in total across the Gospel accounts, though not all are exhaustive in each Gospel. No words can describe the human pain and suffering our Lord experienced before and during his time on the cross. During this time period in the history of the Roman Empire, death by crucifixion was considered the worst death for the worst of criminals. Even before getting to the cross, Jesus would have experienced whipping so severe that much of His flesh was torn away from His body. One Old Testament prophet, writing hundreds of years before Jesus came into the world, described what Jesus would look like after his sufferings: "His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mankind" (Isaiah 52:14). Crucifixion, as practiced by the Roman government, was a merciless, cruel, and an evil practice.

In addition to the physical agony, Jesus had to endure the humiliation of having his clothes taken from Him. He had to endure being spat upon and the mocking of the soldiers, the criminals, and the Jewish leaders taunting him, saying he "saved others; let him save himself." The truth is, Jesus could have saved himself at any time. He told his disciples as much. He told them he could call down legions of angels, and they would rescue him. Jesus had complete control over what happened to him. Listen to what the Lord said in John 10:17-18: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. **No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the authority to lay it down, and I have the authority to take it up again.** This charge I have received from my Father."

Though this is true, in the language of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, it was the "will of the Lord to crush him." He was pierced for our sins; he was crushed for our iniquities. With his wounds, the Christian is healed. In the words of Scripture, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

It was the will of God for the Savior to take upon himself the punishment for sinners, sinners like the very ones here in this account who were mocking and spitting on him, and sinners just like all of us.

Yet as awful and terrible a death by crucifixion is, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to us. Luke had written earlier in chapter 19 that "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." That is exactly what we see in this passage, all the way to the point of death. We see Jesus's love, compassion, and concern for the souls of men. He is the same today. The Word of God tells us that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Even today, Christ is concerned for each and every soul. His love, compassion, and desire to save sinners from judgment are as strong today as when He walked on this earth.

Jesus makes two statements from the cross, as recorded by Luke, that deserve our careful attention. The first is in verse 34: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The second is in verse 43: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." From these two sayings of Jesus on the cross, there are undoubtedly many lessons to be learned. For our purposes, I would like us to focus on two crucial gospel truths, two lessons from Jesus's words while suffering on the cross. First, mankind has a great need because of the seriousness of sin. Second, Christ is willing and able to meet that need and receive all who come to Him in faith. In this, I want us to see Christ's amazing love. One author I recently read wrote, and I wholeheartedly agree with him: "The cross is the supreme revelation of God, and it is a revelation of unimaginable love and mercy."

Mankind's Greatest and Urgent Need

What is mankind's greatest need? Jesus, I believe, tells us as much in verse 34: "Father, **forgive** them." Indeed, Jesus was likely referring here to those present who had no idea who he was. But in a much broader sense, I believe mankind is in his mind. You see, mankind is in desperate need of the forgiveness of sins. God's Word is abundantly clear that by nature, man is in rebellion against God. Outside of Christ, man is spiritually dead. A person may be physically alive, but outside of a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, the Bible teaches he or she is a spiritual corpse. You see, quite simply, sin is a fatal disease. It is terminal.

How often in the gospel accounts is the forgiveness of sins at the heart of Jesus' message? In Mark 2, when four friends carried a paralyzed man to Jesus for healing, even before he was cured, the Lord said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." When God created man, man rebelled against God. Sadly, mankind has been doing that ever since. Sin is all-consuming and self-destructive. Jesus said in John 8:34, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."

What is more, by nature, man is unaware of the magnitude of sin. In other words, there is a natural ignorance of man's condition before God. Jesus says as much in verse 34. In his prayer to the Father, He says, "**They know not what they do**." Unaware, ignorant, and blinded to the fact that sin separates them from their Holy Creator. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote about this many centuries before Christ's time.

I recently read an article that helps us understand sin's self-destructive and ignorant nature. The article describes a technique Eskimos use to kill wolves. Eskimos often need to kill wolves because wolves tend to kill and eat too many of the caribou and deer that the Eskimos depend upon for food in the wintertime. First, the Eskimo coats a sharp knife blade with animal blood and allows it to freeze. Then, he adds another layer of blood and another until the blade is completely concealed in a block of frozen blood. Next, he fixes his knife on the ground with the blade up. When a wolf with a great sense of smell follows his nose, he smells the blood and discovers the bait. He licks it, tasting the fresh, frozen blood. He begins to lick faster, vigorously lapping the blade until the keen edge is bare. Feverishly now, harder and harder, the wolf licks the blade. So great becomes his craving for blood that the wolf is ignorant of the razor-sharp sting of the blade on his own tongue, nor does he realize that his insatiable thirst is being satisfied by his own blood. He craves more and more until he bleeds out and drops dead in the snow.

Just as the wolf licks the blood and doesn't realize his end is destruction. In the same way, many go on with their lives unaware of their great need for forgiveness of sin. For all who are not in Christ, sin leads to more sin, and they cannot stop, even though they will forever be alienated from the Creator. God, the Holy Spirit, must intervene.

The Bible vividly describes a person's life outside of a relationship with Jesus Christ. Writing to Christians, the apostle Paul reminds them of what they were like in an unsaved state. In Ephesians 2:1-3, he writes:

> *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.*

Dear reader, if this describes your condition, know for sure that Jesus Christ has a deep concern for your soul and a deep desire for you to know Him. We know for sure that forgiveness for sin and guilt is available at this very moment because of Jesus Christ's death on the cross. I hope that these words of Jesus during His suffering will help us see the willingness, compassion, and desire Christ has for souls. In the midst of His suffering and pain, in the midst of the cruel activity against Him, even then He prays to God the Father for their forgiveness.

We learn from the death of Christ that God hates all sin and evil. God is a perfect moral being, perfect in every way. Perfect in love, perfect in mercy, and yes, perfect in justice. How many in our world, and perhaps even we ourselves, think in our hearts that sin is but a very small matter? That is exactly what the evil one wants us to think. Going back to the garden and the serpent's dialogue with Eve, remember the third chapter of Genesis:

> *Now, the serpent was craftier than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

From the very beginning, the devil tried to make light of sin. He is the father of lies. He is still active today with the same lies. So many in our day hear the account of Adam's fall and think to themselves, what is all this fuss, just because they ate a piece of fruit? They miss entirely

that their Creator had given the command. It was nothing short of rebellion against their good and loving Maker.

If we truly want to understand what God thinks of sin, look to the cross of Jesus Christ. Look at the terrible pain and suffering Christ endured for His people. There is a stanza in one hymn focusing on the cross of Christ that I want to share. The hymn's title is "Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted," and the third stanza captures the magnitude of Christ's suffering for sin.

“Ye who think of sin but lightly, Nor suppose the evil great, **Here may view its nature rightly**, **Here its guilt may estimate**. **Mark the sacrifice appointed**, **see who bears the awful load**! 'Tis the Word, the Lord's Anointed, Son of Man and Son of God.”

This powerful stanza points us to the cross as the place where we can truly understand the seriousness of sin and estimate its guilt properly by seeing the magnitude of the sacrifice required to atone for it.

This is God's love for sinners. If you desire to be free from the guilt and shame you feel inside, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross is for you. Jesus cried out to people like you and me, saying, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29). This is the Christ of Holy Scripture.

Christ's Willingness to Forgive

Secondly, not only does this text teach us of mankind's urgent need, namely the forgiveness of sin, but it also teaches us the wonderful truth of Christ's power and **willingness to save** all sinners who come to Him in faith. This is clearly shown in the experience of one of the criminals sentenced to death by crucifixion alongside Jesus. Look again at Luke 23:42. The man says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus responds, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

What an amazing change took place in this man's life. Here, he is being punished justly for his crimes. He undoubtedly lived a loose and fast life, likely with little to no concern for his eternal soul, a soul that can never die. The gospel writers Matthew and Mark tell us that at the

beginning of the crucifixion, both criminals were mocking him. Mark writes in 15:32, "**Those who were crucified with him also reviled him."** Matthew's account of the crucifixion and the two criminals is even more detailed. In Matthew 27:38-44, we read:

> *Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.*

According to Luke's account, something very remarkable happened to one of the two criminals. One of them went right to his grave, mocking and reviling the Son of God, rejecting the only one who could eternally save him. He had no fear or respect for God. His heart was as hard as stone. Like so many people in today's world, his conscience was as hard as a rock. He was, sadly, a spiritually blind fool. The result is eternal separation from God.

But what a change we see in the other criminal. Perhaps he understands he is a sinner for the first time in his life. He knows it not just in his head but in his heart of hearts. Notice in verse 40 that he is no longer mocking Christ. He asks the other criminal, "Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong" (verses 40-41).

What is he saying? He is confessing his sinfulness, acknowledging his guilt. But not only that, he humbles himself and acknowledges that he deserves condemnation. "We indeed justly," he says to the other criminal. He makes no excuse and knows full well that his sentence is due to his own actions. Finally, before it was too late, he saw himself as a lost sinner in need of a Savior. He sees that he cannot save himself, so he cries out to the Lord Jesus Christ by faith: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (verse 40).

This man no longer went along with the crowd. The Bible tells us that Jesus was despised and rejected by men. That was no longer true for this changed criminal. Now, Jesus was everything. Jesus is King. Despite all the world's noise, this man, in his dying moments, knew in his heart his need for Christ. And he learned Christ's willingness to save him. The criminal believed. Thus, we see the necessity of faith and the wonderful grace of God's acceptance of the believer.

Conclusion

So, what about us? The real question, the most important question, is have we experienced the forgiveness of our own sins? Earlier, I said we need only look at the cross to see how seriously God views man's sin. I would also like to say that we need only look at the cross to see the amazing love and mercy our great God has for mankind. Do we believe Jesus Christ suffered and died because of our own sins? Perhaps you are not like the mockers in this account, but still, in your hearts of hearts, have not, by faith, come to the Lord?

Yes, this repentant criminal waited until the last moment of his life to come to faith in Christ. I hope no one thinks they have time to wait or that they can live however they like and think down the road they will consider their sins before God. We have no idea when we will die. Today, tomorrow, a year from now, twenty years from now. Also, if you are planning to wait, how do you know you will even be interested in Christ if you have ignored him your whole life?

I close with a stanza from a wonderful hymn that Christians worldwide love. The hymn is entitled "Man of Sorrows," and one verse reads: "Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood. Hallelujah, what a Savior!" Amen.